

Professor Marsha Weisiger's **Tips for Writing Your Thesis**

- Please keep in mind that the purpose of writing a master's thesis is to demonstrate that you can ask historically sound questions, conduct primary-source research for evidence sufficient to answer your questions, analyze and interpret the evidence, and make a sound argument. I also look for your ability to *narrate* history.
- Keep in mind, especially, that a thesis requires lots of primary-source research. (This may require you to travel to archives outside the area, depending on your topic. The department offers small awards to help support this travel; ask the Director of Graduate Studies for more information.) You cannot write a thesis based primarily on secondary material. Nor can you write a thesis based largely on speculation. You must support every assertion—even your speculations—with some sort of evidence, preferably more than one piece of evidence.
- Most theses are five chapters long, with an introduction (which includes a historiography of your subject—see below), three substantive chapters, and a conclusion. However, the form your thesis takes depends on your subject.
- Expect to write at least three drafts of every chapter. That means you need to allow me sufficient time to review each chapter at least twice before you present your final draft to your thesis committee. In your first draft, DO NOT simply dash out something on your computer and give it to me to read. Your first draft should be fairly polished, with proper footnotes, and so forth. Before giving it to me to read, you should edit the draft, read it aloud, and edit it again. After I read that first draft, expect to write at least two more revisions based on my comments. Yes, this is hard. If it wasn't, everyone would have a masters' degree.
- PROOFREAD each chapter ALOUD before turning it in. Look up words you're not sure of; don't rely on spell-check. Examine your punctuation carefully. Make sure you have full and proper citations. When you fail to proofread, you waste my time; I consider it an insult.
- Your thesis should be in dialogue with the historiography of the subject and the larger historiography of the United States (or Europe, or Asia, or whatever). You need to demonstrate a familiarity with that historiography and show how your thesis builds on that earlier work and adds something new to our knowledge.
- Writing a thesis is NOT like writing three seminar chapters, sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion. You cannot crank out a thesis chapter in a week or two. Trust me on this.

- While a thesis does not have to be an exhaustive examination of the subject matter (that's the domain of a dissertation), you should look at the obvious sources available to you. Many archival collections are available on microfilm or microfiche, through Interlibrary Loan. Some are available in published form. Don't overlook the microfilm collections in Branson Library, Government Documents, the Rio Grande Historical Collections, the U.S. Manuscript Census, Special Collections at UTEP, the Center for Southwest Studies at UNM, the State Archives in Santa Fe, and Special Collections at the University of Arizona. You may also find that some archives have put a portion of their collections on the Internet, but these are often very partial; please consult with me before using Internet sources.

- While some of you may use methodologies (such as ecological theory) drawn from other disciplines, the main "method" used by historians is immersion in the sources. Though we often begin with a hypothesis, historians don't generally start with a story, then find evidence to prove it. We immerse ourselves in the sources, analyze them, then mobilize them into a coherent interpretation or story.

Taking and Organizing Notes

- As you do your research, it is extremely important that you take notes carefully. This applies both to primary sources and secondary works. You must set up a system for keeping a record of the citation for the source and for the page numbers from which you get material. You'll need to keep a record of the full citation for each archival collection, published collection, monograph, article, or whatever you source material you use (this may be a computer record or a card file), and develop a system for noting the citation on each document you take notes on or photocopy. There are different types of citations for different types of works (whether an archival collection, government document, book or collection of writings, journal article, etc.), and you must record all the relevant information for your citation at the time you take your first note. This will prevent difficult back-tracking later, for when you write, you'll need to provide the source for every piece of information, other than your own thoughts and analysis.

- For archival collections, be sure to get the following information: proper name and location of the archive, name of the collection, collection or manuscript number, the box number, the number and name of the file, any other relevant information (for example, the National Archives in Washington D.C. uses a classified file numbering system, and you need to record the number for each file). If you saw the collection in microform, you also need to record the publication data, collection number, reel number, and so forth, for the microform. Failure to record all this information while you have your document in hand will cause you headaches later.

- When copying multiple documents from one file, be sure to record all the citation information on each and every document. Otherwise, when you separate the documents into whatever organization system you devise, you won't know where they came from. If you have multiple pages in a document, which you staple together, a single citation on

the document is sufficient. [You may develop efficient ways to deal with this while in a distant archive, where time is money, but you must be sure to go through your documents each day and put the citation for each file on each stapled document.]

- For each note you take, you must record the page it came from. I put page numbers in brackets at the beginning of a note and at each change of page.
- When using microfilm collections, be sure to record the frame number of each page you take notes from or copy. I note frame numbers with an “f” [e.g. f324] to differentiate them from page numbers.
- It is also essential that you differentiate between the exact wording of the work you’re using and your own paraphrases (whether you’re taking notes from a primary or secondary source). I put paraphrases in brackets and the exact wording in quotation marks.
- When quoting in your notes, be sure to transcribe exactly, including punctuation, capitalization, and special treatments of words (such as italic). This is important, because when you choose to quote something in your thesis, you must transcribe the quote accurately.
- If you come across something that might be a particularly important document or one you might want to quote from, you should copy it, either by scanning it or photocopying it. This is important for two reasons: (1) the meaning of a document may change as your understanding of your subject matter grows deeper, so you’ll want to revisit the original when you begin to write; (2) you’ll have the document to recheck your quotes.
- Once you begin taking notes, you need to develop an efficient system for organizing them. For the notes you take on a computer, you can keep them in a data base. There are a number of good data bases for taking notes, but be sure to record the citation for each note in the data base. **BE SURE TO BACK UP OFTEN** (preferably at the end of each research session). I’ve known many people who’ve lost their research to computer crashes.
- For copies, you need to develop a good system for retrieving information. Not only will you need to find information to analyze and write about, if you ever publish your work, you’ll need to be able to look up every quotation in the original document and check the accuracy of the quotation against the original. Sometimes, I’ll ask you to check the accuracy of your quote, as well, and you need to be able to find it efficiently. I keep a record of every document in my filing cabinet in a data base and retrieve by calling up names and dates (which I record systematically in day/mo./year format for this purpose). You can use whatever system works best for you; what’s important is having a good system.

WRITING THE THESIS

Your Argument

- A thesis is an argument. Your thesis must have an overarching argument, stated clearly in the introductory chapter, and each subsequent chapter should advance that argument in a logical manner. Additionally, each chapter should have its own sub-argument, stated in a thesis paragraph. More than that, each paragraph in each chapter should have a mini-argument, stated as a topic sentence.
- Your main argument must pass the “so what” (or BFD) test. Why should we care? How does it connect to larger issues in American, U.S. western, environmental history, or Native American history?
- The focus of this thesis (or any historical work) must be *your argument*, based on primary sources. It should reflect *your voice*, not simply report the information you’ve gleaned from others. Nor should it simply report historical facts. Reporting is the province of journalism. Historians analyze and interpret evidence, give it meaning, and place it in context.

There is no “cookbook” for writing a thesis. Every work is unique, depending on your topic, the scope of your work, your narrative approach, and so forth. But there are some general rules of composition, which I discuss below.

Framing and Signposting

- Pay attention to the way you frame your argument and the way you frame each chapter. To help frame their arguments, historians often (though not always) open with a historical vignette. This should grab the readers’ attention and illuminate the questions you’re asking and the argument you’re making in a vivid, provocative manner.
- Your thesis paragraph(s) should appear right after the opening passages or vignette. As a general rule of thumb, this should be at least by the third or fourth page. It may appear much earlier. It may also appear later, if your opening vignette is long.
- Remember that the opening, thesis, and closing paragraphs are the most important for the thesis. This rule applies to each chapter, too.
- Your history—as with any narrative story—should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Some theorists define this as “inciting incident,” background, conflict, climax, and resolution. Pay attention to the arc of your story. Your “inciting incident” should generally be tied to your resolution, like the beginning and end of a circle. Notice the difference between this narrative structure and the idea of an introduction, body, and conclusion. Also notice that this structure is not necessarily chronological. Not all projects, of course, fit a narrative framework. And yet even in a work of discrete essays tied by an analytical theme, it may be possible to take a narrative approach to each essay.

- Avoid the following framework, so loved by high school English teachers: tell me what you're going to say, say it, then tell me what you said. Boring, boring, boring. Instead, offer an argument, prove your argument, and tell me why it's significant and what its implications are for the present and future.

- Signposting: I use this term to refer to the signals you use to guide the reader through the thesis and through each chapter. Your thesis paragraph and topic sentences are one kind of signpost. Your final paragraph in each chapter should also offer a signpost; it should segue to the next chapter. And periodically (roughly once every five paragraphs), you should signpost for your reader how the particular discussion you're engaged in pertains to the argument of that chapter or your larger argument (or both). When you shift your discussion to another major topic or when you flash back or forward in time, you should also provide a signpost, so we don't get lost. If you want to read a masterful approach to signposting, I recommend Jennifer Price's essay on the Pink Plastic Flamingo, in *Flight Maps*.

Organization

- Each chapter should be well organized. You need to think about your argument and build that argument analytically and empirically through an orderly flow of paragraphs. Here are two suggestions for figuring out how to organize your chapter after you've written your first draft (and before you give it to me): (1) Color code each subject, then reorganize your information so that you discuss each category of information only once, in an order that builds an argument. (2) Even if you do the color-coding, also try "reverse outlining." (This is the technique I use.) List your topic sentences in order, in outline form. When you read those topic sentences in order, they should tell a linear story that never loops back, except perhaps at the end, and they should together build a persuasive argument. They should read like a story.

- Each paragraph should be well organized. Every paragraph should discuss ONE TOPIC. Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence, which is often a mini-argument that builds on the last mini-argument in the previous paragraph and lays the groundwork for the next. Every sentence in that paragraph should be a proof for that mini-argument, and your proofs should generally go from the general to the specific (like an inverted pyramid). (Notice that you should be able to back the claim you make in your topic sentence with at least three pieces of evidence.) Any evidence not directly related to your topic sentence belongs in another paragraph, with its own topic sentence. Moreover, each of the sentences in the paragraph should flow smoothly into the next. The final sentence of each paragraph is the second most important (next to the topic sentence), in that it should provide the "clincher" for that mini-argument or the lesson you want your reader to draw from the evidence you've just provided. Generally, your last sentence should also segue to the next paragraph, although the first sentence of the next paragraph may provide a transition. (Note that these "rules" can occasionally be broken. Your first sentence may be a transitional sentence and your second or even the third sentence can be

the topic sentence. Moreover, a signposting paragraph may offer no new evidence but instead analyze the evidence you've presented in preceding paragraphs.)

- A good rule of thumb is that each paragraph should have about five sentences (but don't adhere to this too rigidly).
- Think about the meter of your sentences. Vary the length of your sentences. It can be very effective to employ very short, pithy sentences from time to time, especially after a long and complicated one. When you read your work aloud, pay attention to the rhythm of your sentences and to echoes of repeated words. Develop an ear for language.
- Avoid repeating yourself. If you find yourself repeating information or referring the reader back to previous information, chances are there's an organization problem you need to fix. Try reverse outlining to catch the problem.
- Historiography: Your first chapter should generally offer a historiography of your subject, connecting your argument to the broader literature on the topic. The length of the historiography depends on your topic. It should focus on the *arguments* (not the particulars) that other historians have offered, place those arguments in dialogue with one another (which often dictates a chronological treatment), and situate your own work within that dialogue. Explain how your work takes issue with previous work, builds on it, responds to it, fills in some gap—whatever it is you're doing in relationship to previous treatments of the topic. You may link your work to more than one historiographical dialogue.

Evidence

- Most of your evidence should come from primary sources. You may also use secondary sources, especially for context, but these should be scholarly ones. Feel free to mine their footnotes for primary sources, but be sure to acknowledge when you initially got your idea from someone else's scholarship.
- You must *select* pertinent evidence ("facts") that supports your argument. Not only that: you must explain and interpret the evidence to build that argument. You must also account for the evidence that seems to contradict your argument and show us how it doesn't really contradict—perhaps it's simply more complicated than that other evidence would initially indicate. And you must OMIT those facts—no matter how interesting—that don't really pertain to your argument, except perhaps tangentially. There are billions and billions of facts out there, and you can't possibly include all of them. The skill of historical writing is in selecting evidence, analyzing it, and building an argument. The real *art* is in crafting that argument with literary and narrative flair.
- Show us, don't tell us: Don't just tell us something happened and expect us to take your word. *Show* us with the use of vivid evidence, imagery, statistics, and well-selected quotes. Try to put a human face on statistics by telling us a story involving actual individuals. Use narration to paint us a visual image of the evidence.

- Remember that you must persuade us that your argument is true with your use of evidence. Repeated assertions do not persuade. And don't simply lay out your evidence. You must *analyze* the evidence and explain how it supports your argument. Moreover, one single piece of evidence does not prove a claim. You must provide multiple pieces of evidence to be persuasive.
- When drawing on secondary scholarship, be sure to read classic accounts AND the latest scholarship.

Quotations

- NEVER (with rare exceptions) quote a secondary source. The point of a thesis is to provide YOUR interpretation in your words, not that of another historian. Synthesize the information, analyze it in conjunction with other information you've uncovered, and discuss it in your own words, as it relates to YOUR ARGUMENT. There are three exceptions to my "NEVER" rule: (1) If you are challenging a particular scholar's argument, you should quote the argument, thereby creating a foil for your own; (2) if you are building on a person's argument or drawing on someone else's theory, you may quote briefly (but no more than a phrase or perhaps a sentence or two), so that you don't appear to be taking credit for his/her argument as you construct your own on top of it; or (3) if you are analyzing or critiquing the language or rhetoric the other scholar used, you should quote the passage that you subject to scrutiny. Even then, you should quote only those portions of the passage or sentence that are absolutely necessary (I mean EVERY WORD must be necessary) and paraphrase the rest.

If you truly paraphrase the information in your own words, give it your own voice, place it within your own argument, and cite the source of your information, you are not plagiarizing. Obviously, you may need to use a word or even a phrase that appears in the other author's work; if it's just an ordinary word (not a word the author coined) or a boilerplate phrase, you may use it without being guilty of plagiarism. If it's a whole sentence, don't use it; paraphrase. By the way, changing a word or two in someone else's sentence is not what I mean by paraphrase.

- You should quote primary sources only in five instances: (1) to illustrate or punctuate your own point with evidence; (2) to add colorful language to your narration; (3) to provide specific evidence or proof of a point you're making that may be controversial; (4) to analyze the language and rhetoric of the source; (5) to let us hear the voice of historical actors, particularly if you're criticizing the person or challenging previous interpretations of that person's thoughts, actions, or words. Even then, you should quote only those portions of the passage or sentence that are absolutely necessary and paraphrase the rest. This might mean quoting only a word or two, or quoting a phrase or two, interspersed with your own linking phrase. Moreover, whenever you quote a primary source, you need to set the quote up and then perhaps analyze the quote and convey the meaning you want us to get out of it, as it pertains to *your argument*.

- When you do quote, you must also integrate the quote into your own syntax, including changing capitalization to make it fit and adjusting your verb tense to make the tense of the original fit. This is an art. For help with thinking about this, consult a good grammar reference book. I also highly recommended reading the chapter in *The Chicago Manual of Style* on quotations. It lays down all of the scholarly, stylistic, and grammatical rules regarding the use of quotes.
- If in reading a secondary source you find a quotation of a primary source that you'd like to use, look at the footnote and find the location of the primary source. If it's a published source—even if you must get it through Interlibrary Loan—or from an archives that's readily accessible to you, go to the original and quote the original. Only if the source is in an archive that you don't have access to should you borrow the quotation from the secondary source. If you must do that, footnote it as: Quoted in (citation to secondary source).
- PROOFREAD every quotation and make sure it is 100 percent accurate, including the punctuation. (When your quotes contain obvious errors, revealing that you have not proofread, I get really ticked off. You're wasting my time!) Quotes that express archaic language or dialect should be retained as is. However, if a quotation that is meant to reflect modern English usage contains grammatical or syntax errors, there are ways to fix it. For obvious typographical errors, simply correct them; you can indicate this by putting the correction in brackets (e.g., th[e]). If someone uses a word incorrectly or a quote has a grammatical error, you can follow that word or phrase with [sic]; see *Chicago Manual of Style*. This is particularly useful if you really want to retain the wording as is, but you want to make clear that you haven't erred in quoting. However, sometimes this approach makes the person you quote look illiterate. In those instances, where you want to focus on the person's ideas and not on how she or he expressed them, you may want to truncate the quote and paraphrase the section that is ungrammatical. The point is to make the person's ideas clear while capturing the language that you're using for evidence, color, or historical veracity.

Citations

- Please use footnotes. They are easier for your thesis committee members to follow, and the NMSU thesis editor prefers them. Each chapter should begin with footnote 1. (The easiest way to control the footnote numbering is to make each chapter a separate file.)
- At a minimum, every paragraph should have a citation for your source. The exception to all this is when the paragraph or sentence consists solely of you your own analysis or thoughts.
- In drafts, every sentence (or series of sentences coming from the same source and same page) should have a citation. In the final draft, you can group your sources so that you have one citation per paragraph, except when the paragraph contains a quotation. In that case, the material preceding the quote gets a footnote; the quote gets a footnote; and the

material succeeding the quote gets a footnote. (If your quote is quite short, however, you can still gang all the citations at the end of the paragraph and simply conclude the paragraph with: “The quotation is from X.”)

- The first use of a particular citation in a given chapter should be a “full” one. Subsequent uses of that citation in the same chapter should follow an abbreviated style (see the *Chicago Manual of Style* for guidance). The abbreviated citation includes the author’s last name and generally the title of the work up to the colon. (If the title is still quite long, truncate it, but do so in a way that conveys the title of the book. Don’t just use the first word or first two words of the title; i.e., *My First Summer in the Sierra*, not *My First*.)
- For your citations, carefully follow the rules in the *Chicago Manual of Style* (the rules vary depending on the type of source); this holds true for website citations, too. Buy it! Follow it! Know it!! Almost every type of contingency in a citation is covered in this manual. Look it up! I get very testy when I see incorrect citation forms or incorrect punctuation of citations. Proper citations are the mark of professionalism.
- While you’re buying reference books, there are several writing, analysis, and grammar references I recommend:
 - Theodore Bernstein, *The Careful Writer* (Free Press, 1995)
 - Margaret Shertzer, *The Elements of Grammar* (Longman, 1996)
 - William Strunk Jr., E. B. White, Roger Angell, *The Elements of Style* (Pearson, 2000)—at a minimum, buy this one.
 - William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (Harper Resource, 2001)

The Art of Writing

- Choose each and every word carefully. Choose the word that best conveys both meaning and nuance. And look each word up—you’d be surprised at how many words you’ve been misusing over the years. I recommend the *American Heritage Dictionary*, because it offers lots of good usage notes (including things like which preposition a word takes and idiomatic phrases). You can get this on line through: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (now available on line—access it through the “Find Articles” list on the NMSU Library’s website) is the bible on word usage throughout the history of the English language. If you don’t have time to look words up, you don’t have time to write a thesis.
- Use a simple, direct style. Many graduate students (and many Ph.D.s) write in a convoluted style that is hard to follow and often grammatically incorrect. Oftentimes people use convoluted sentences to make their ideas seem more important or to hide the fact that they don’t really know what they’re talking about. Don’t imitate them. Plain, clear prose written in a straight-forward fashion is always best and, indeed, most powerful. Avoid “academese.” Don’t be afraid to use “I” or “we,” if it will make the sentence clearer. Clarity is your goal.

- Write vividly. Paint visual pictures; write about people, places, events, and even statistics in ways that create pictures in the readers' imagination. Use vivid verbs. (At the same time, avoid gushy language and "purple prose.")
- Always write in the PAST tense (and its related tenses) in historical writing. Use the present tense only when the fact is a timeless truth (such as "influenza is caused by a virus that travels . . ."). Also be sure to use the sequence of tenses (simple past, past perfect, etc.) properly to convey relative changes in time, if needed for clarity. If you're not certain about this, consult a grammar reference book. (Bernstein offers terrific guidance on this subject, under "sequence of tenses.")
- Avoid jargon. Explain any jargon that's absolutely necessary for you to use. Don't assume knowledge on the part of the reader.

Common Grammatical Errors

- Subject-verb agreement: Look this up in a good grammar reference (such as Strunk, White, and Angell). A singular subject takes a singular verb; a plural subject takes a plural verb; a compound subject takes a plural verb; a "group" subject may take a singular or a plural verb, depending on context. Words like each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, and someone take a singular verb. Don't let intervening words between the subject and verb confuse you.
- "Danglers." Look this up in a good grammar reference. (Bernstein is particularly good on this.) Generally speaking, introductory clauses should modify the word that comes immediately after the comma. That applies, too, to clauses at the end: they should modify the word immediately preceding the comma. In general, modifiers of any sort should be adjacent to the words or phrases they modify.
- "Parallelism." Use the same grammatical construction for expressions that are similar in content and function. Watch for this particularly with series or with expressions linked by "both, and"; "not, but"; "not only, but also"; etc.
- Passive voice (signaled with PV in my mark-up). Passive voice often disguises agency—that is, who did what. "Mistakes were made." This is a classic statement designed to hide the identity of who was responsible. Active voice is also more concise, direct, and vivid. One way to discover passive voice is to look for "was" or "were," especially when accompanied by another verb, and to look for "by." You should rewrite the sentence, "the ball was thrown by the boy," as: "the boy threw the ball." There are instances when one *should* use passive voice—when you really can't tell who the agent was or when you want to emphasize the object of action—but it's *rare*. You may also *choose* to use passive voice to focus on the object rather than the subject, but do this purposefully and sparingly.

- Sentence fragments. At a minimum, a sentence must have a subject and a verb. Writers do use fragments for special effect, but only those who are highly skilled should attempt it.

- Restrictive/non-restrictive clauses (aka essential/non-essential clauses). These are “that” or “which” clauses. A non-restrictive clause is parenthetical; it provides additional information but does not serve to identify or define the antecedent noun. For non-restrictive clauses, separate the clause from the subject with a comma, followed by “which.” A restrictive clause identifies the antecedent noun and is not parenthetical. Use no comma, and precede the clause with “that.” (Examples: The Gambrel House, which was designed by Greene and Greene, was extraordinary. The house that has the broken window is mine.)

- Know the difference between “sex” and “gender,” and use the words properly. The misuse of these words is one of my pet peeves.

- For the specific requirements for NMSU theses, please see: <http://gradschool.nmsu.edu/Guidelines/>. It’s always more efficient to follow these guidelines from the very beginning.

- Here are some useful websites for improving your writing:

The “bible” for good writing has long been Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*. It’s the best. Here’s a web version:

<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

Good guides to proper English grammar:

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/GRAMMAR/index.htm>

<http://grammartips.homestead.com/articleindex.html>

http://www.grammarbook.com/english_rules.asp

<http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

For citations:

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

For standard proofreaders’ marks, so you can interpret my comments:

<http://www.colorado.edu/Publications/styleguide/symbols.html>